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Empowering Our Ministry: Working with the Holy Spirit (II)

John 14:12-19

Thomas Michael Smith
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This morning I'd like to take us ahead in the church calendar to Lent, that period of time in which we reflect on the events leading up to the trial, the crucifixion, the days in the tomb, and the event of Easter. Just prior to his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus spent an evening with His disciples that they would never forget. It was on that evening that Jesus girded Himself with a towel and stooped to wash the feet of these men. It was on that evening that Jesus exposed the apparently trustworthy Judas Iscariot as the betrayer to the rest of the unsuspecting disciples. And it was on that evening that Jesus instituted what we call Holy Communion.

This section of Scripture is five chapters long. All of chapter 13 through all of chapter 17 in the Gospel of John. It's known as the 'Upper Room Discourse.' Now, we would be overwhelmed to be present when Jesus washed our feet, exposed a traitor within our midst, and be present for the very first Eucharist. But what was most pressing on these disciples minds wasn't any of these things, but something Jesus said a near the end of what we call chapter 13. What He told them was that He was going away. He told them they couldn't go where He was going. And they got the sense that getting to where He said He was going, was not going to be either easy or pleasant.

Where we sit, we know that His going away was for the purpose of effecting the work of redemption. We know that Jesus had spoken openly with them about His death and resurrection, but we also know that they failed to grasp the implications of what He said to them. Or, they just didn't want to hear that kind of talk. So, when He finally says in John 13 that He is going to go away, they enter into a great emotional crisis.

It is for this reason that Jesus then turns His attention toward comforting these men, His disciples, in the fourteenth chapter of John. Although He says that His going away is a return to His Father's house, Jesus assures them that it is a house with sufficient room for each of them. In fact, He says that the reason He is going away is to prepare a place for them. And then He tells them they need not worry about not knowing the way to His Father's house, because they know Him, and He is the way.

Here and elsewhere Jesus talks about coming again. Today we think of it as the Second Coming. These first disciples assumed He would return in their lifetimes, just as we do, or at least just as we should. But whether He returns in a few years or in a few decades, these first disciples were left with yet one more lingering question. 'What about the intervening time between the departure of Jesus and His return?' After all, Jesus had called these men to ministry. He had called them to be preachers of the Gospel, and it would seem they took that call seriously. Whether fishing nets or tax tables, they had surrendered everything to do His work. In such a surrender, they must have assumed their call to be a lifelong endeavor. Were they mistaken? With Jesus saying He is going away, didn't this change the original plan?

The problem is that no change in the original plan or in the expected level of disciple-commitment can be seen in the words of Jesus. As a matter of fact, He tells them that in their future ministry: "the works that I do you shall do also, and greater works than these will you do."

We have trouble seeing what was happening. We have the luxury of history. From their perspective, I'd guess these fellows were devastated by the thought of His departure. I'd bet that the notion of continuing this gospel ministry without His presence seemed beyond rational comprehension. For heavens sake, they all had firsthand experience with the kind of violent opposition Jesus had aroused. But at least Jesus was Jesus and He could (and did) engage the authorities from Scripture in such a way that they tended to back down. And He was able to do those miraculous things. While it was okay to be courageous in His presence, the thought of continuing His work apart from Him must have seemed suicidal. And present in their thinking must have been a painful awareness of their repeated failures - Peter's fear when commanded to walk on the Sea of Galilee, the faithlessness of Philip when Jesus sought to feed the five thousand, the inability to heal the demon-filled boy with epileptic seizures, the half-heartedness of James and John who wished to call fire down from heaven to consume a village of unbelieving Samaritans, their collective arrogance as they argued over personal greatness and supremacy. And the response of Peter, that very evening, as Jesus sought to be their servant in the washing of their feet.

Look, these people loved Jesus. They had given up everything to follow Him. Despite their deeply rooted sinfulness, they longed for people to acknowledge Him as Messiah. Yet weakness and inadequacy continually were expressed in their lives, as they get expressed in our lives. They were asking themselves one key question: by what means will we who are powerless accomplish the work that Jesus Himself has burdened us to do?

They had learned a painful lesson throughout the previous two-plus years, namely, that when left to themselves, failure was the inevitable consequence. And so it's at this very point, in the shadow of His departure, that Jesus now speaks His most comforting words to these men - left to themselves they would never be.

He tells them of the coming of the Holy Spirit. The prophet Joel in the Old Testament looked forward to the day in which the Spirit wold be poured out upon all flesh, not just the few prophets or the king who had God's Spirit within. Joel wrote that there would come a day when all believers in God would have the Holy Spirit within. And so Jesus used this opportunity in the upper room to tell them that the Holy Spirit would be sent to them, when He went away.

In John 16 Jesus says this: "But now I am going to Him who sent me; and none of you asks Me, 'Where are you going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart. But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper shall not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you."

Jesus' job is to bring atonement for sins, to bridge the gap caused by our sinfulness, to make a path back to God. When that job is finished, Jesus will go away, but will not leave His disciples without the resources to get their job done. The Holy Spirit's job is to come and dwell internally in all those who profess Christ as Lord. The Holy Spirit's job is to convict and convince and persuade concerning sin. The Holy Spirit's job is to remind people of Jesus and give the words of the Word to speak when disciples are feeling a memory loss. The Holy Spirit's job is to guide people to salvation; the Holy Spirit will help build koinonia-community; and the Holy Spirit will empower by giving spiritual gifts that build up the (this) body of Christ.

So, don't worry, guys. Jesus is going away, but God will still be with us. I've said this before. We use the term "Emmanu-el" around Advent and the Christmas season. It's Hebrew for 'with us, God.' We think of Jesus, incarnated as a fellow human being, as God with us. But when Jesus finished His work after the resurrection, and eventually ascended to heaven, He was no longer Emmanu-el, God with us. From that point on, from the Day of the first Pentecost, Emmanu-el has been the Holy Spirit, God with us, in us.

If we are to work with the Holy Spirit, we must understand these Scriptures, and get to know the Holy Spirit, and ask Him to give us what He stands ready to provide. Now's a good time to start.

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